DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 502 CG 018 659

AUTHOR Iscoe, Ira; And Others
TITLE Opinions about Child Abuse Survey: An Assessment of Professional Attitudes concerning Child Abuse.
INSTITUTION Texas Univ., Austin. Inst. for Human Development and Family Studies.
SPONS AGENCY Texas Univ., Austin. Research Inst.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (93rd, Los Angeles, CA, August 23-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; *Child Abuse; Child Advocacy; Child Caregivers; *Child Custody; Child Neglect; Community Programs; Parent Child Relationship; *Social Responsibility; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Texas

ABSTRACT

Public awareness of the problem of child abuse and public willingness to participate in solving the problem have grown in recent years. To further the success of advocacy efforts, volunteer recruitment, fund-raising, and implementing programs for child abuse prevention and treatment, an understanding of both non-professionals' and professionals' attitudes concerning child abuse is needed. The Opinions About Child Abuse Survey was completed by 132 persons attending the Governor's and Attorney General's Conferences on Child Abuse and Neglect held in September, 1984, in Austin, Texas. Respondents included mental health professionals, law enforcement officers, judicial system professionals, and individuals involved in the direct care of children. The survey identified respondents' perceptions regarding the causes, conditions of, and desired response to the problem of child abuse and assessed the individual's level of direct and indirect experience with child abuse. Those surveyed agreed that treatment and prevention were priorities for community support and that the state is ultimately responsible for dealing with the problem of child abuse. While the majority of professionals noted that removing a child from the home should be a last resort, they did not agree on the actual allocation of funds for intervention programs. (Three tables of response statistics are included and the survey instrument is appended.) (Author/ABB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED263502

Opinions About Child Abuse Survey

An Assessment of Professional Attitudes Concerning Child Abuse

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

IRA ISCOE

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG 018659

Institute of Human Development and Family Studies
University of Texas at Austin
Austin, Texas 78712

Paper presented at the 93rd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, August 23-27, 1985.

Abstract

The *Opinions About Child Abuse Survey* , developed by the Institute of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Texas, was administered to 132 participants of the Governor's and Attorney General's Conferences on Child Abuse and Neglect. Respondents included mental health professionals, law enforcement officers, judicial system professionals, and individuals involved in the direct-care of children. The survey identifies individuals' perceptions regarding the causes, conditions of, and desired responses to the problem of child abuse. In addition, the survey assesses the individual's level of direct and indirect experience with child abuse. Contrasting opinions are discussed and possible applications of the survey highlighted.

The Institute of Human Development and Family Studies would like to acknowledge the support of the Policy Research Institute of The University of Texas at Austin. Without their gracious support this project would not have been possible. The research team included the following individuals:

Dr. Ira Iscoe, Director IHD&FS
Dr. Jeffrey M. Anderson, Department of Human Resources
M. David Rudd, Research Associate IHD&FS
Karen J. Bordelon, Parents Anonymous
Thomas R.Chidester, Univeristy of Texas

Executive Summary
Opinions About Child Abuse Survey

- Purpose: identify individuals' perceptions regarding causes, conditions of, and desired responses to the problem of child abuse.
  - -Who is ultimately responsible for the problem of child abuse, the individual or the community?
  - -Should the abuser be punished or treated?
  - -Should community action take the form of prevention or intervention?

Participants

- Surveys were completed by 132 participants of the Governor's and Attorney General's Conferences on Child Abuse and Neglect.

- Only four of the respondents had no experience with child abuse.
  - -59 percent had firsthand experience with abuse in their families.
  - -Over 92 percent knew firsthand of abuse outside their families.

- Of those surveyed, 92 were women, 40 were men, and 91 were parents.

- The respondents included 53 mental health professionals, 20 law enforcement officers and judicial system professionals, and another 20 individuals involved in the direct-care of children(e.g. teachers).

Responses

- Most respondents believe family history, socio-economic conditions, and life stress lead to child abuse.

- In addition, child abuse is thought to be a widespread problem and not the product of particular personality traits.

- In general, respondents believe child abuse to be the responsibility of the state. Furthermore, they support efforts to institute appropriate educational and treatment programs.

- While respondents believe that the state has the right to intervene in child abuse cases, a majority believe that the child should not be removed from the home.

Introduction

Over the past few years, the public has become both increasingly aware of the growing problem of child abuse and more willing to take part in community solutions. Social service organizations and the media can be credited with having taken the necessary first step in confronting child abuse by raising public consciousness about the problem. However, difficult challenges remain.

Some investigators emphasize the need for treatment in cases of abuse, whereas others demand effective prevention of abuse. In addition, some child abuse professionals support individual therapy while others stress the need for family therapy. Often times, this rather confusing atmosphere creates tension between law enforcement officers, therapists, judicial officials, community members, and legislators. The net result can be a fragmentation of planning efforts and the unsuccessful implementation of child abuse treatment and prevention services.

The *Opinions About Child Abuse Survey* represents an effort to understand professionals' and non-professionals' attitudes concerning child abuse---identifying areas of agreement and disagreement. Because the success of advocacy efforts, volunteer recruitment, and fund raising depend, in part, on citizens' understandings of the problem of child abuse; the *Opinions About Child Abuse Survey* can provide valuable information to program planners. Ultimately, a goal of this ongoing research project is to make it possible to use this knowledge in project development and evaluation.

As a result of increased media attention and the apparent wave of "social consciousness" focussed on the abused child, it would appear that the time is right for concerted action on the part of educators, policy makers, and treatment professionals. The *Opinions About Child Abuse Survey* can serve as a useful aid in this process.

Methodology

Participants. The Governor's and Attorney General's conferences sample consisted of 132 persons who attended conferences held in September, 1984 in Austin, Texas. The identified purpose of the conferences was to coordinate more effective prevention efforts, increase awareness and understanding of the problem, and to provide a forum related to prevention legislation and program funding.

Procedures. Copies of the survey including a cover letter describing the purposes of the project were distributed among conference participants. These participants were asked to contribute about 15-20 minutes of their time to complete the survey and return it to collection boxes located within the conference center.

Findings

The following tables present the general findings of the survey. Over 50 percent of those participating had firsthand experience with abuse in their families and over 90 percent knew firsthand of abuse outside their families. This finding suggests a couple of possibilities: those attending the two state conferences were most often directly involved in child abuse programming or that many professionals in the child abuse field have a personal history of or substantial experience with abuse. In addition, there was found to be an extremely high level of agreement among professionals with respect to the causes, conditions of, and preferred responses to abuse.

Significant differences were anticipated with respect to various professional groups opinions about abuse. Such a high level of agreement among professionals should make the formulation of educational programs, treatment programs, and social policy much easier than expected. One area in which professionals did tend to disagree concerned the actual allocation of funds for intervention programs.

As indicated in the third table, no single program received overwhelming support when participants were instructed to choose the three intervention programs which they deemed most important. However, respondents did see treatment and prevention as priorities for community support. Not surprisingly, their first concern is for the children.

Those surveyed tended to prefer traditional professional treatment services such as mental health programs and psychiatric clinics rather than volunteer-supported programs, although both were identified as important. The special investigative and judicial programs were seen as less critical. Finally, a common thread among professionals is the belief that child abuse should be considered a top community priority and strides need to be taken to create and implement appropriate educational-treatment programs.

Family history, socio-economic conditions, and life stress were identified as the most common factors believed to result in and perpetuate child abuse. However, abusive individuals are not believed to possess any particular personality traits and the problem was identified as being quite pervasive, with all social classes being affected. A finding which may help us more clearly define the role of government, the community, and the individual in dealing with child abuse is that professionals deem abuse to ultimately be the responsibility of the state. Although the state is believed to be responsible for taking action in cases of abuse, the majority of professionals indicated that removing the child from the home should be a last resort.

Perceptions of the Problem

- Respondents level of agreement with statements about conditions associated with and causes of child abuse are summarized in the following table.

ITEM STATEMENT	%AGREE	%DISAGREE	AVERAGE[1]
MAJORITY AGREEMENT			
Adults who were abused by their parents are prime candidates for becoming abusers themselves	99.0	1.0	6.47
As unemployment and the economy worsens, we can expect child abuse to increase.	92.3	3.8	5.87
Many child abusing parents believe it is their duty to physically discipline a disobedient child.	93.1	3.8	5.75
Under certain conditions, anyone is capable of child abuse.	88.5	7.6	5.71
A parent who is isolated from friends and relatives is at greater risk for child abuse.	81.0	9.1	5.66
MAJORITY DISAGREEMENT			
Working mothers are more inclined to be child abusers than mothers who stay at home with their children.	9.8	76.5	2.50
Most child abusers have below average intelligence.	6.3	79.5	2.48
A parent who is a child abuser is likely to be incompetent at almost everything.	9.8	88.6	2.27
Child abuse rarely occurs among people with a strict religious background.	6.8	87.1	2.06
Child abuse is not as widespread a problem as the media and the government make it out to be.	5.1	93.1	1.75

[1]Scale ranged from 1(strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree).

Opinions About How to Respond to Child Abuse

- Respondents level of agreement with statements about possible responses to child abuse are summarized in the following table.

ITEM STATEMENT	%AGREE	%DISAGREE	AVERAGE[1]
Despite federal cutbacks for social programs, child abuse funds should not be cut back.	93.9	2.3	6.39
Communities should consider the prevention of child abuse a number one priority.	93.9	3.8	6.22
The state has the responsibility to protect children from abusing parents.	90.9	4.5	6.09
If schools and other local programs provided more training for parenthood there would be less abuse.	93.2	5.3	6.00
People who physically harm children should be treated as crimminals.	41.2	49.6	3.76
For the sake of the child it is best to take the child away from parents who abuse him or her.	34.3	55.0	3.59
Children belong to their parents and courts should rarely intervene in cases involving parental mistreatment of children.	5.4	93.9	1.80

[1]Scale ranged from 1(strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree).

Specific Interventions They Supported

o Respondents were asked to select three programs they considered to be the three most important for a community to fund.

Program	Percent program ranked as one of three most important:			
	First	Second	Third	Total
Mental health programs designed for treating abused children.	26.8	22.0	18.1	66.9
Parent education group for adults wanting to learn how to parent effectively.	15.8	12.6	13.4	41.8
Psychiatric clinic where adults can get low cost therapy.	13.4	15.0	11.0	39.4
Self-help group for parents with a child abuse problem.	8.7	10.2	15.7	34.6
Specially trained police team to investigate child abuse.	7.9	10.2	12.6	30.7
Law court specifically designated for child abuse cases.	7.9	12.6	7.1	27.6
Telephone hotline for reporting child abuse to authorities.	11.0	6.3	4.7	22.0
Home visitor program which matches a volunteer with a parent.	5.5	5.5	8.7	19.7
Telephone helpline for parents manned by trained volunteers.	3.9	5.5	8.7	18.1

Implications and Future Directions

The possible uses and applications of the *Opinions About Child Abuse Survey* are numerous and many have already been identified. Those which offer the most promise include:

- guaging public support for particular child abuse programs or legislation.
- focussing discussion in a wide range of settings such as workshops and conferences.
- identifying essential components for educational and treatment programs.
- monitoring the change in opinions as a result of educational or training programs, workshops, and conferences.
- simply identify public concerns with respect to the problem of child abuse.
- learning the attitudes and beliefs of prospective volunteers in child abuse prevention/treatment programs.
- promoting understanding and communication among members of community-wide child abuse prevention programs.
- determining and comparing interagency and intra-agency beliefs about client groups and services.
- discovering the beliefs of clients and parents themselves.

The Institute of Human Development and Family Studies will continue to test and refine the survey instrument to strengthen its value to the professional community. The research team welcomes suggestions and feedback on the questionnaire. A new version of the questionnaire is now available(see Appendix A).

Appendix A: Opinions About Child Abuse Survey II
Revised Version

Opinions About Child Abuse Survey

An Assessment of Attitudes Concerning Child Abuse

Institute of Human Development and Family Studies

University of Texas at Austin

Austin, Texas 78712

Opinions About Child Abuse

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

- Please answer every question. If you like, you may discuss items in the comment section.
- We want to know your honest opinions. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire.
- Most of the questions ask that your circle one of several numbers that appear on a scale beside the item. You are to choose the one number that best mathches the description of how your feel about the item.
- The scale descriptions are different in different parts of the questionnaire. So, be sure to read the special instructions that appear with each section.

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING.

I. Causes, Conditions of and Responses to Child Abuse

This section includes a number of statements that express various opinions about child abuse: who does it, what causes it, and what should be done about it. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement on the seven-point scale which ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Circle the appropriate number beside each statement using this seven-point scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. As unemployment and the economy worsens, we can expect child abuse to increase.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. People who abuse children are mentally ill.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Child abusers are loners and have no close relationships with anyone.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Tougher punishment of child abusers would help stop child abuse.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Even in severe cases of abuse, a child should stay in the home.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Teenage pregnancy often results in child abuse.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. We shouldn't be so shocked at child abuse, given the amount of violence we're exposed to in movies and on T.V.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. Adults who were abused by their parents are prime candidates for becoming child abusers themselves.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Child abuse is just a sympton of more wide-spread social problems such as poverty.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. Alcohol problems cause child abuse.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. Single parents are more likely to abuse their children.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. More police time should be dedicated to discovering abuse.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. If Alcoholics Anonymous helps people to stop drinking, Parents Anonymous should be successful in helping child abusers.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. A parent who is isolated from friends and relatives is more likely to abuse a child.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. Child abuse is NOT as widespread a problem as the media and the government make it out to be.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
16. People with strong religious convictions rarely abuse their children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. Poor people are more likely to abuse children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. Violence in the news media leads to more child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. Child abuse is evenly distributed among social classes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. The dividing line between physical punishment and child abuse is a thin one	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. Most child abusers have below average intelligence	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. Unruly children only learn from physical punishment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. If high schools provided more educational programs concerning the "responsibilities of parenthood" there would be less child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24. Most child abusers have emotional problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. Poverty helps cause child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26. A parent is more likely to abuse a step-child	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. Community programs offering adults education about how to be a better parent are important to ending abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28. Child abuse authorities should investigate every report of suspected child abuse, even when the evidence is only circumstantial	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29. If neighborhoods with a high incidence of violence had recreational outlets for families, child abuse would decrease	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30. Child abuse rarely occurs among people with a strict religious background	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31. Child abusers have poor relationships with other adults	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
32. Child abusers are likely to be incompetent at almost everything	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
33. Programs to strengthen the family would prevent child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
34. Most child abusing parents had poor relationships with their parents	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
35. Volunteers should be helpful to families with child abuse problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
36. People who abuse children should be treated as criminals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
37. Most child abusers can't keep a job	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
38. Publicity campaigns explaining how abuse cases are handled and telling people how to report abuse are a good way to stop child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
39. Child abuse will end only if we are willing to fund programs to combat poverty	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
40. People who abuse children are desparate for help	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
41. When parents don't get along, children are more likely to be abused	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
42. Courts should rarely intervene in cases involving parental mistreatment of children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
43. Child abusers are social deviants who cannot be expected to change through psychotherapy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
44. Under certain conditions, anyone is capable of child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
45. There would be less child abuse if our present child abuse laws were always enforced	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
46. One would expect to find more child abuse among families who are always on the move	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
47. Because single parents who work outside the home can't cope with the frustrations and stress of parenthood, they are more likely to be abusers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
48. The government has a right and responsibility to intervene wherever abuse occurs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
49. One is more likely to find abuse in crowded, run-down neighborhoods	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
50. There would be less child abuse if more people had good jobs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
51. A babysitter who abuses a child should be barred from ever working with children again	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
52. To protect an abused child, it is usually best to remove the child from the home	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
53. Abusive parents forfeit the right to raise their children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
54. Parks and recreational programs help prevent child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
55. If more people went to training on parenting and child rearing skills there would be less child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
56. Most child abusers are only trying to discipline a disobedient child	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
57. Attempts to keep together families in which child abuse has occurred are doomed to failure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
58. Child abusers can be helped by therapists	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
59. Mental health programs treating the abused child are the most important services we offer to remedy child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
60. Unplanned children are more often targets of abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
61. A poor education is one cause of child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
62. Each case of abuse should be handled by the courts on an individual basis.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
63. Therapy can help stop the problem of child abuse.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
64. Because single parents who DO NOT work outside the home can't cope with the frustrations and stress of parenthood, they are more likely to be abusers.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
65. Most parents have abused a child at one time or another.....	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

II. Making Choices

Please select the one item from <u>each pair</u> of items that best describes what you think should be done about child abuse.

1. Either Punish Abuser.....or.....Prevent Abuse
2. Either Prevent Abuse.....or.....Treat Child
3. Either Punish Abuser.....or.....Treat Child
4. Either Punish Abuser.....or.....Treat Abuser
5. Either Treat Child.....or.....Treat Abuser

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

III. Interventions

Communities have limited financial and human resources available to deal with problems such as child abuse. Considering the limited number and types of intervention programs a community can afford, review the following list of child abuse programs and rate the importance of each in dealing with the problem of abuse in your community. Circle the response that comes closest to your opinion.

Circle the appropriate number beside each statement using this scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6
Unimportant	Slightly Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Extremely Important

	Unimportant	Slightly Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1. A telephone helpline for parents manned by trained volunteers	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. A psychiatric clinic where adults can get low cost therapy	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. A police team especially trained to investigate child abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. A self-help group in which parents with a child abuse problem help one another	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. A low court specifically designated for hearing child abuse cases	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. A Home Visitor program which matches a volunteer parent with an abusing parent	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. A telephone hotline for people to report suspected abuse to authorities	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. A mental health program designed for treating abused children	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. A parent education group for any adult wanting to learn how to be a more effective parent	1	2	3	4	5	6

Assume that your local government's budget constraints allowed for no more than three of the above programs. Please indicate by number which of the above three you would recommend:

◯ Most Important ◯ Second Most Important ◯ Third Most Important

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

IV. Experience with Child Abuse

Some of us have had more direct experience with child abuse than others, and this experience may influence our perspectives. Please read the following statements and circle the response that reflects your own experience with abuse.

1. I know someone in my community who has a child abuse problem. YES NO

2. There is someone in my family who has abused his/her children. YES NO

3. I have never personally known someone who was a child abuser. YES NO

4. My job puts me in contact with families who have had a child abuse problem or who are at risk for abuse. YES NO

5. On occasion, my own behavior toward children could be called abusive. YES NO

6. Some of my own memories are of being physically or emotionally abused as a child. YES NO

7. I am or have been involved as a professional or volunteer, in child abuse prevention or treatment programs. YES NO

V. Background

Information about your background is very important to our research. Please answer every question. Circle the letter which corresponds to the appropriate answer, and when a blank is provided, please write in the requested information.

1. What is your age?

   a. under 21
   b. 21-30
   c. 31-40
   d. 41-50
   e. 51-60
   f. over 60

2. Are you male or famale?

   a. male
   b. female

3. To what racial or ethnic group do you belong?

   a. Black
   b. Hispanic
   c. White
   d. Other

4. What is your marital status?

   a. single, never married
   b. married
   c. divorced
   d. widowed
   e. separated

5. Do you have children?

   a. yes
   b. no

6. Which of the following best describes your political views.

   a. liberal
   b. moderate
   c. conservative
   d. other

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

This completes the questionnaire. We would appreciate any comments you would like to make. Please write them in the space below. When you have finished, please return your completed questionnaire before you leave this session.

Thank You

COMMENTS:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

(c) Copyright. Institute of Human Development and Family Studies University of Texas at Austin, 1984 Not for reproduction or circulation without written permission.